

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY  
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**THE TRINITY, THE WHOLE TRINITY, AND  
NOTHING BUT THE TRINITY**

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Course 5602  
Military Thought and the Essence of War  
Seminar N

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>2004</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2004 to 00-00-2004</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Trinity, the Whole Trinity, and Nothing But the Trinity</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>15</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

# THE TRINITY, THE WHOLE TRINITY, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRINITY

## “Book” 9: *More On War*

Introduction. A book purporting to discuss potential changes in the nature, character, and conduct of war between two interwar periods is an ambitious undertaking. The last time I sat down to tackle a task of that magnitude and pen a few thoughts, it took eight books. Never having truly finished, my wife, unfortunately, had to do the final editing, since alas only the first chapter of Book 1 was a final draft.<sup>1</sup>

Resurrection. However, I will take advantage of the opportunity of walking once again among the living; since this time is very limited, this “book” will actually be a paper. Short of being ‘book-length’ in size and ‘dissertation-length’ in scope, it is an open question whether any paper can treat these subjects with serious scholarship, able to withstand rigorous scrutiny and peer review. Instead, I will take the opportunity to raise new questions, propose new avenues for research, revise and append my previous writings, and use the Trinity as the explanatory model; this is my definition of a ‘think-piece.’

Changing conduct and character of war at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bearing the admonitions above in mind, there is no cause for fear, and certainly no cause to write further on the nature of war. Eight books, *On War*, and a decent interval of time – seventeen decades – provided empirical proof for the validity of my concepts, the fundamental nature of war remains as previously described. I will argue that some of the differences between the 1990-1991 Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 suggest that the conduct and character of war have changed. Yet, because *On War* is studied throughout the world by military and non-military practitioners and theorists alike, it remains a useful exercise to examine these changes through

the Trinity to highlight the framework AND to dispel generalizations which have tended to oversimplify the Trinity and lose the value of its meaning.

Strategic inflection point. These two wars are chosen because we have reached a “strategic inflection point” worthy of consideration.<sup>2</sup> I will not use the words evolutionary or revolutionary because all succeeding wars tend to “evolve”. Hence, defining “how much evolution” is necessary for one to have “revolutionary” change is problematic; arguing the definition is not the real point.

Though I am criticized for avoiding the use of mathematics and “quantification” in general, consider the mathematical definition of an inflection point. At that point on a curve, the second derivative of the function, namely the rate of change of a curve, is zero; the other required condition is that concavity must change on either side of the alleged inflection point. In short, the concept of an inflection point is straightforward; the curve bends and changes in a discrete and very different way at that point.

Finally, I shall note that many people refer to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) as the Second Gulf War, but I will avoid using that term since the implication is that OIF is a continuation of the first Gulf War with the intent of ‘finishing’ the job. This implication is mistaken; different in aims, means and ways, they are two separate, distinct wars.

### **Review of the two trinities – the paradoxical Trinity and its three actors**

Let us review the fundamental nature of war which closed the first chapter of my first book in the briefest way. War’s dominant tendencies comprise a paradoxical trinity. The first aspect – primordial violence, hatred, and enmity – are passions, to be regarded as blind, natural forces. The second aspect involves the play of probability and chance within which creativity roams. The third aspect is that an element of subordination exists since war, as an instrument of policy, must be subject to reason.<sup>3</sup>

Beware of confusing and commingling the trinity with the three actors. Applying these three aspects to three groups of actors, I noted that the first aspect mainly concerns the people, the second, the commander and his army, and the third, the government. But, in this paper, this paragraph stands apart from the preceding paragraph for a reason. Chiefly, many have linked these concepts and ideas too tightly, and have interchanged these “two trinities”, rendering the examination of the recently changed conduct of war troublesome. In a paper published several years ago, Dr. Christopher Bassford noted that over time, the definition of the trinity has been mistakenly been defined by many as the actors - people, the commander, and government – as opposed to real paradoxical trinity of passion, chance, and reason<sup>4</sup>. As we shall see, the distinction must be maintained and considered separately, even though the prevailing method to illustrate the model consists of a simple triangle with the words “passion/people”, “chance & creativity/commander”, and reason/government” written at each of the three vertices.

An important distinction, rephrased. Finally, I assert that the three tendencies – not the three groups of actors – are deep-rooted, variable in their relationship to each other, and that seeking to fix an arbitrary relationship among them conflicts with reality. Therefore, the task is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.<sup>5</sup>

### **The conduct and character of the Gulf War and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF)**

Conduct and character of Gulf War. The differences in lethality, precision delivery of munitions, control, pace and tempo, and communications in the short twelve years between the Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) and OIF are truly staggering. Desert Storm, considered a tactical and operational success, was a 100 hour ground war, preceded by an air war that lasted months, in an environment of air supremacy. A dozen or so divisions from many nations

required half a year to marshal, transport, position, and then train their forces. Using an uncomplicated strategy - the famed “left hook” – the combined coalition went on to defeat vast portions of the enemy’s ground forces in a wide-open desert, essentially unimpeded by constricting terrain or the ‘messiness’ of built-up, urban areas (with the exception of Kuwait City). If the coalition had been given the option to choose their terrain, the conditions, and the enemy, they would have probably chosen the same enemy and the exact patch of ground in which they fought.

Conduct and character of OIF. Seventy percent of the bombs and missiles dropped in OIF were ‘smart’, an order of magnitude percentage increase over Desert Storm; this precision strike capability – ‘ferocious, yet discriminate’ – is unprecedented.<sup>6</sup> Three Republican Guard Divisions were destroyed - virtually annihilated - in a week. As such, it took only 2 and 2/3 U.S. divisions to seize Baghdad, destroy the regime, and allow President Bush to announce the end of major combat operations in record time. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division’s 250 mile advance in three days is a seminal event, sure to be recorded by history; by the time they reached Baghdad, it is estimated that only a dozen or so Iraqi tanks survived to fight, all were quickly killed.<sup>7</sup> A Russian military expert declared, “The Americans have rewritten the textbook, and every country had better take note.”<sup>8</sup>

### **First aspect of the Trinity: Passion – primordial violence, hatred, and enmity**

A new connection between one aspect of war and an actor NOT previously associated with that aspect? Has the lethality of war in OIF - the creativity of the military positively influencing chance and probability - reached the point that it now has a perverse, almost counter-intuitive effect on the passion and will of the American people? A new causal connection? How do we maintain “primordial violence” and “hatred/enmity” in the people AFTER the end of

major combat operations, if the enemy is dispatched in record time on the battlefield? It is counter-intuitive, but protracted war may have had some very important second-order effects.

Consider the expectations of the people. At the conclusion of the Gulf War, victory was declared and force drawdown began within a very short period of time. Five months later, only skeletal forces remained in Kuwait. It was limited war waged against the enemy forces in Iraq, for the political objective was to restore Kuwaiti sovereignty. All that was required to restore sovereignty was a military operation to expel all invading and occupying Iraqi forces. This was accomplished in spectacular fashion for the enemy forces either withdrew to Iraq or were destroyed; end result – Kuwait was returned to the Kuwaitis unconditionally.

The importance of the will of the people. It has been said often that the will of the people in a democracy is the center of gravity, and I have maintained that will is the ‘key incalculable. The President of the United States understands this clearly. In an effort to buttress the will of the people and/or to express the will of his people, he said unequivocally, *“We’re not leaving [Iraq]. ... This country will stay the course. We’ll do our job.”*<sup>9</sup>

People. Returning to the paradoxical trinity, it appears that the violence and passion of war - its very nature - has not changed one iota in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the people of today may be different, in the sense that their conditions are radically different than when I first wrote *On War*, over 170 years ago. The liberal democracies of today did not exist in my time. People did not enjoy the standard of living they enjoy today. Instant and ubiquitous communications, 24 hour news saturation, the existence of thousands of freely expounding analysts and experts, and a middle class vastly more educated and attuned to the world around them, do not remotely compare to the conditions faced by the people two centuries ago. In fact, these 21<sup>st</sup> century conditions may help explain why the three actors are now more similar and less distinct as separate classes of actors. Consider that previously, government had a degree of autonomy and

more freedom of action from the people, all of which do not exist today. As an example, in today's world, people are scientifically polled the day after victory, and asked if they believe/think "the troops should come home" and "if the end has been achieved."

Some conclusions. Is the model of the trinity still valid? Absolutely. I said that the theory must maintain a balance among the three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets. The salient difference is that today's magnet is an electromagnet that pulses intermittently and violently. The pendulum, that swings between the vertices, shifts and swings much faster and therefore needs to be understood and anticipated.

### **Second aspect of the Trinity: Reason – subordination of war as an instrument of policy**

Political objectives / justification of the Gulf War. President George H.W. Bush said "this [the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq] will not stand." As a result, the political objective for the Gulf War could hardly have been clearer and was soon followed by a supporting – if perilously close - vote from the U.S. Congress and a unanimous resolution by the Security Council of the United Nations.

Political objectives / justification of the OIF. What was/were the political objective(s) in OIF? How did the government fare in its responsibility to subordinate war to state policy and, thus, to reason? Unfortunately, there is an on-going, world-wide debate on the legitimacy of the invasion of Iraq, as well as the motivations for those who opposed the war and consequently led the United Nation's successful effort to thwart the last explicit resolution the United States sought and did not obtain. While scores of books will be written on this subject, for the purposes of this paper, only one clear end is indisputable. Secretary Powell, the Secretary of State, gave a long and detailed presentation to the United Nations laying out the case that the Iraqi regime either possessed or was developing weapons of mass destruction and, hence, was in material



breach of previous UN resolutions. In short, neutralizing this threat required the regime to be overthrown, ousted, arrested, or killed. That argument was also made to the American people.

Implications arising from the types of war in connection with “regime change”. What type of war was OIF in terms of aims? Like Desert Storm, OIF was a limited war. Decapitation of the regime implies we want to preserve and harness the body. In fact, to the maximum extent possible, American aims were to destroy the ‘resisting’ army and those who kept Saddam Hussein in power, but spare Iraqi infrastructure, avoid inflicting casualties on the civilian populace, and minimize collateral damage. In fact, our psychological operations had hoped to convince large portions of his army to lay down arms and join the coalition in overthrowing the regime.

Unlimited danger from limited ends/means? Six months after President Bush declared the end of major combat operations, definitive proof that Saddam’s regime possessed WMD has yet to be found. To be fair, this is not proof that WMD did not exist or that they may be discovered in the future, only that the United States has not found or even alleged to have found, the proverbial “smoking gun.” Yet, the U.S. Army is there to stay for the foreseeable future because there is widespread agreement that withdrawing and letting Iraq fend for itself at this time would lead to complete chaos in the region and lose a major round in the global war on terror (GWOT) ... military triumph, followed by political defeat.

Failure to articulate ALL the aims of war? Global war on terror? In the aftermath of 9/11, the global war on terror is best described as total war if one examines the National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS) or listens to any of hundreds of speeches and statements by the President or senior government officials. The President could have made the explicit case to the people or to the United Nations that OIF and the removal of the Iraqi regime was necessary to: 1) eliminate a sanctuary for terrorists; 2) eliminate a terrorist regime that committed

genocide against its own people; or 3) remove a regime that systemically violated human rights and international norms of behavior. None of those arguments was made to the United Nations, except we should note that those subjects have been discussed and raised by many and are of no great surprise.

Conditioning the people was/still is at odds with the type of war? But the President of the U.S. has now said that the on-going war in Iraq (and Afghanistan) is but one campaign in the overall global war on terror. So we have the curious mixture of limited war aims (OIF) nested inside of a total war (GWOT) that is, in turn, being fought with limited means. This assertion of limited means is certainly open to debate; but the fact that the price tag for next year, \$87B - a tiny fraction of national GNP - is subject to fierce political debate raises many questions. Have the American people been enlisted in a total war effort ... as they walk to their banks to deposit 2002 tax refund checks, complaining about the costs of the war?

A new requirement for statesmen? I would be remiss if I failed to reiterate, in any paper I author, that the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to establish ... the kind of war they are embarking; neither embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.<sup>10</sup> Let me add additional, reinforcing thoughts. More than ever, the character of twenty-first century limited warfare in a democracy complicates the sustainment of the people's passion and their will, the key incalculable. While the commander fights friction and fog on the battlefield, the government cannot allow friction and fog in its reasoning and its articulation of ends and means. In sum, after the statesman has decided on the kind of war he is embarking upon, the next most important, far-reaching act of communication is to explain to the people, as unambiguously as possible, the ends and means.

Another new connection between one aspect of war and an actor NOT previously associated with that aspect. Earlier, I noted that the three actors in modern times are less distinct and “closer” together. Evidence suggests that the government may have inappropriately stepped into the main realm of the people, the element of passion. While definitive proof is hard to come by, it is an incontrovertible fact that there is wide discussion and debate as to whether some senior members of government have had a “passion” – a long-standing belief that the Iraqi regime needed to be overthrown as part of the GWOT. As such, the interpretation of intelligence and the subsequent establishment of the WMD nexus could have been tainted by this motivation and may have preordained OIF. To the extent possible, the preceding phenomenon must be guarded against. Loss of confidence by the people in the government’s ability to reason and subordinate war to political aims is calamitous; leave the passion to the people!

**Third aspect of the Trinity: the impact of creativity on the play of probability and chance.**

The commander and his army. This book cannot be finished without a re-examination of the commander and his army. No serving commander today needs to be told that courage and creativity will tilt the twin balances of probability and chance in his favor. Similar to the other two aspects of the trinity, this aspect, maybe even more so than the other two, is unassailed and inviolate, despite the changed character and conduct of war. Newspapers are replete with stories where luck intervened favorably or unfavorably and creativity (widely known now as skill and training) overcame obstacles. Nevertheless, new reflections for commanders are useful.

Fighting regimes, not nation-states. By way of introduction, the United States has not recently fought a nation-state. For the past 20 years or so, it has been fighting and overthrowing regimes – Grenada, Panama, Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and now Iraq. While

this is a much-remarked upon fact, a close reading of the American National Security Strategy (NSS) explains this noteworthy phenomenon. The document expresses the nation's beliefs in inalienable and universal human rights of dignity, personal liberty, freedoms of all types, and self-determination, all possible only through democratic political systems.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, consistent with this view, it would follow that where and when these conditions do not exist, by definition, it would NOT be freely chosen; furthermore, the abridgment of these freedoms must be caused by an "evil" regime.

The implications of fighting regimes to the commander. The inflection point worth considering is how war against regimes manifests itself in the realm of the commander. More to the point, whom do the commanders and armies fight? In the Gulf War, killing the enemy and all his machines remained a timeless object. Who can forget General Norman Schwarzkopf describing his operation by noting that the Republican Guard was the enemy's center of gravity and that the operational scheme was entrap it and then 'kill it?' Elegant in simplicity, Peloponnesian commanders in their wars would have readily understood and even agreed with this "scheme of maneuver" and the "commander's intent."

Annihilation of the enemy's forces? The changing character and conduct of war requires more elaboration than that destruction of the enemy's force is the main objective. Returning to the third chapter of Book 4, I claimed that "... direct annihilation of the enemy's forces must always be the dominant consideration."<sup>12</sup> Was killing the enemy the most important military object in OIF? Recall that the rules of engagement allowed for wholesale defections and the expected, and much-hoped for, laying down of arms by the enemy. Great effort was expended in passing out leaflets explaining how to turn gun tubes to the rear and explaining that the American army was in Iraq only to fight Saddam Hussein's regime and liberate the people from an illegitimate, despotic government. While this tactic is not particularly new, it was truly believed

by the coalition. After all, the world-wide passing out of a 55 ‘most wanted’ card deck was another milestone and was meant to reinforce the notion that the strategic aim was to “decapitate” a regime, but save the body, which presumably would have the ability to rise up immediately.

### **Conclusions (from the author’s spouse)**

Once again, my husband has died and left me the chore of editing and reviewing an unfinished, unpolished pedantic draft. Moreover, similar to his previous books, it ends without a satisfying or unifying conclusion. After nine books, one would think Clausewitz would have learned to write better.

In simple prose, the main points of this think-piece are:

1) The fundamental and basic nature of war is enduring and does not change.

2) Clausewitz believes that his theories need to be updated to account for the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare. Recall his belief that theory which is not reflected in reality is useless, “All that was written ... was an exaggeration and a faulty application of sound ideas, and was completely unrealistic.”<sup>13</sup>

3) The paradoxical Trinity remains a valid model through which to study war.

4) The three actors – people, government, commander/army – have “changed” in a kaleidoscope fashion, in response to changes in the conduct and character of war AND modern conditions.

5) If the three actors (a trinity with a little t) are to married up with the Trinity, it is best to view that model as two separate triangles placed on top of each other, as opposed to one triangle with an aspect of war and one actor listed at each vertex . The distinction is important.

6) When Clausewitz drew a connection between each of the three aspects of war with an actor, he said “[each aspect] MAINLY concerns [an actor]”. He did not use the words ONLY or EXCLUSIVELY.

7) Ref. para. 5., in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the three groups of characters are losing their unique identities when compared and contrasted to earlier periods in history. The blurred distinctions, caused by revolutionary changes in communication and knowledge, suggest that each actor has ‘invaded’ the realms and aspects of other actors.

8) The pendulum, maintained by the magnets of the paradoxical Trinity, remains unbalanced and ever-changing in a continuing quest to find a quixotic balance; the perturbations and movements cannot be calculated in advance. The magnets in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are electromagnets. Magnets have fixed poles at either end; electromagnets can reverse the polarity at each pole when surged with current. As a consequence, what once attracted can swiftly (almost instantaneously) change and then repel.

9) The fact that the character and conduct of war changed between the Gulf War and OIF is notable, but not unusual, nor unique. War’s character and conduct continues to evolve, the nature of war does not. If this were to be false, Clausewitz would have to come back and explain it in Book 10.

10) Clausewitz writings and theories offer valuable insight, but no prescription. “The insights gained and garnered by the mind in its wanderings among basis concepts are benefits that theory can provide. Theory cannot equip the mind with formulas for solving problems, ... nor can it mark ... [where] the sole solution is supposed to lie...”<sup>14</sup>

11) In war, the outcome is never final ... *On War*, the writing is never finished.

## Notes

1. Note: Chapter 1 of the first book is the only chapter in the eight books that contains numbered sub-headings.
2. The term “strategic inflection point” was first used by Dr. Lani Kass, Professor of National Security Strategy, at the National War College, National Defense University, to describe a ‘tipping point’.
3. Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 89.
4. Christopher Bassford and Edward J. Villacres, Edward J, “Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity,” Parameters (Autumn 1995), <http://www.Clausewitz.com/cwzhome/trinity/trinintr.htm> (15 October 2003).
5. Clausewitz, 89.
6. Andrew F. Krepinevich, “Operation Iraqi Freedom: A First-Blush Assessment,” (Washington, DC: CSBA – Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003), 20.
7. Ibid, 21.
8. Ibid, 10.
9. Judy Keen, “Bush: We’re Not Leaving,” USA Today, 29 October 2003, 1.
10. Clausewitz, 88.
11. The White House. The National Security Strategy of the United States of America. 2002. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2002), vii.
12. Clausewitz, 228.
13. Clausewitz, 458.
14. Clausewitz, 578.

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